

The Need for a Cosmopolitan Perspective

Guest post by Fergal Lenehan and Roman Lietz

We are witnessing the rebirth of various kinds of nationalism, worldwide. In the recent German federal election in February 2025, the far-right AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) came second, reaching 21 percent nationwide. In the ‘new German federal states’, i.e., the territory of the former East German state, more than one-in-three people voted for a political party which the German authorities claim to be – at least partly – “assuredly right-wing extremist.” A number of European Union countries, including Italy, Hungary, Slovakia and the Netherlands, now also have far-right nationalist parties participating in government. In the Americas, a white-nationalist authoritarianism presently has more direct power at national government level than ever before in the U.S., while Argentina has been experimenting with a mix of libertarianism and authoritarianism. This political-nationalist rebirth is at odds with the many and various realities of daily life which greatly muddy simplistic ideas of nationhood. These realities were brought about by various phases of globalization and are marked by a multitude of cultural interconnections, not least in the digital context. We argue, thus, for a return to cosmopolitan thinking, which views interculturality from a wide and societal perspective.

How may the relationship between globalization and cosmopolitanism be theoretically conceived? According to the social theorist Gerard Delanty, in his book *The Cosmopolitan Imagination* (2009), globalization “creates a world of enhanced connections” which are not in themselves the “cosmopolitan condition”, but globalization establishes the “preconditions for its emergence” (p. 250). Delanty continues: “Thus where globalization generally invokes an externally induced notion of social change, such as the global market, cosmopolitanism understood in terms of immanent transcendence refers to an internally induced social change whereby societies and social agents undergo transformations in their moral and political self-understanding as they respond to global changes” (p. 251). Thus, the present rise in nationalism may be viewed as a response – a damaging, nostalgic response – to the clear and evident cosmopolitanism of everyday life.

Cosmopolitanism became a fashionable term in academic discussions in the 1990s (Calhoun 2017), which were marked by a rush to develop a vast array of what Harvey (2015) calls “adjectival cosmopolitanisms” (p. 50). Holten (2009) counts a total of 144 adjectival cosmopolitanisms in academic circulation, from “Abject” to “Working Class” cosmopolitanism via, e.g., “Islamic” and “Post-Universalist” cosmopolitanism (pp. 212-216). Thus, a vast array of cosmopolitan concepts exist which are drawn principally from political philosophy and engage with ethics and normative critique; or from sociology and history and look at everyday ‘cultural mixing’ and non-national solidarity; or from cultural and social theory and view cosmopolitanism in relation to moments of cultural change.

The very malleability of the cosmopolitan concept – which can sometimes make it seem incoherent – is actually the great advantage of the notion. The concept has the potential to greatly help scholars, as we argue in our book *Reimagining Digital Cosmopolitanism: Perspectives from a Postmigrant and Postdigital World*, to conceive of the relationship between human beings, their cultural contexts, and the wider communicative world in relation to digital technologies, in new and interesting ways which can potentially advance scholarship. This may be seen in relation to the theoretical re-thinking of the internet as a global and connecting technology, in terms of analyzing of those who use the internet, while the cosmopolitanism discourse also helps scholars when theorizing about the online spaces of encounters and the myriad of digital connections contained by, and possible with, digital technologies.

Digital cosmopolitanism is really best viewed and theorized, we also argue, when perceived in terms of materiality: as represented by the postdigital discussion regarding the materiality-digitality dichotomy, as well as questions of migration and mobility, or as represented by the concept of post-migration and newer interdisciplinary approaches, such as digital migration studies.

The theoretical term postdigital does not signify a world without computers and the internet, but the opposite in fact (Schmitt, 2021): It signifies society ‘after’ digitalization has taken place and has marked society substantially. It is an attempt to outline what is indeed “new” regarding our relationship to the digital but also to highlight the ways that digital technologies are “embedded in, and entangled with, existing social practices and economic and political systems” (Knox, 2019, p. 358). The postdigital discussion, thus, should be seen as intertwined with the discussion surrounding platforms and platformization.

The idea of post-migration (Foroutan, 2019) is fluidly linked to this, taking as its starting point societies in which migration has not ended, but which have been transformed by migration (even if some do not want to admit this). Old, supposed certainties, such as the categorization of migrants according to social milieu and social position, and the dichotomy of ‘native’ vs. ‘migrant,’ can no longer be considered valid. The authoritarianism and nationalism we see now everywhere is also directed against this complex blurring which necessitates – essentially – thinking and acting beyond simplistic ‘pigeonholes.’ The present return of nationalisms can be seen as a rearguard action against such real and existing plurality and cosmopolitanism. Authoritarianism demands loyalty to the constructed notion of the nation rather than fealty to the values of humanism. The concept of a digital cosmopolitanism from below, drawn from digital migration studies and inspired by postcolonialism, is centered on digitally-connected migrants who exist in networked and co-constructed multi-layered spaces between the global and the local and, indeed, represents an explicit attempt to theoretically overcome the dichotomy of the global and the local (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2018).

Can scholarship engaging with cosmopolitanism stem the tide of advancing nationalisms, in societies across the globe? In itself, no, of course not – but representing the complexity of daily lives, including their digital aspect, in terms of the real-existing reality of cosmopolitanism is a scholarly necessity.

Communicating this reality to as many people as possible is also increasingly becoming a societal necessity.

To cite this article, use this format:



Lenehan, Fergal & Roman Lietz. (2025). Guest post: The need for a cosmopolitan perspective. Center for Intercultural Dialogue. Available from: <https://centerforinterculturaldialogue.org/2025/04/07/lenehan-and-lietz-guest-post-the-need-for-a-cosmopolitan-perspective/>

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Resources

Calhoun, C. (2017). A cosmopolitanism of connections. In B. Robbins & P. L. Horta (Eds.), *Cosmopolitanisms* (pp. 189-200). New York: New York University Press.

Delanty, G. (2009). *The cosmopolitan imagination: The renewal of critical social theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Foroutan, N. (2019). The post-migrant paradigm. In J. Bock, & S. Macdonald (Eds.), *Refugees welcome? Difference and diversity in a changing Germany* (pp. 142-167). Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Harvey, D. (2015). What do we do with cosmopolitanism? In N. Glick Schiller & A. Irving (Eds.), *Whose cosmopolitanism? Critical perspectives, relationalities and discontents* (pp. 49-56). Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Holten, R. J. (2009). *Cosmopolitanisms: New thinking and new directions*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Knox, J. (2019). What does the 'postdigital' mean for education? Three critical perspectives on the digital with implications for educational research and practice. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 1(2), 357-70.

Lenehan, F., & Lietz, R. (2025). [*Reimagining digital cosmopolitanism: Perspectives from a postmigrant and postdigital world*](#). Bielefeld: transcript.

Leurs, K., & Ponzanesi, S. (2018). Connected migrants: Encapsulation and cosmopolitanism. *Popular Communication: The International Journal of Media and Culture*, 16(1), 4-20.

Schmitt, P. (2021). *Postdigital: Medienkritik im 21. Jahrhundert*. Hamburg: Meiner.